

# Adventures with Text and Beyond

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## Popular Culture: The New Literacy Challenge for English Teachers

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C. S. Lewis's well-known maxim "We read to know we are not alone" could be the slogan for our current digital age where our culture is driven by the instant and constant sharing and confirming of information. The classroom dynamic has become a competition of whose information is more important: the quickly accessed and popular digital texts or the perhaps less popular print texts. In fact, contending with distracted students who are secretly texting their friends under their desks, while I persist in teaching the classic print texts, was my daily experience. As if that wasn't enough, I also had to fight the movie versions and the seemingly endless supply of summaries and "study" guides that students often chose over reading the assigned text. Still I rejoiced, often by myself, in those classics.

So, like many English teachers I find myself vacillating between the traditional literature-focused

English major of my undergraduate years and the student-focused teacher of my graduate years. My goal is to find balance: meet the needs of students by providing them opportunities for rich, meaningful experiences with a variety of texts. For students, one of the primary challenges is seeing the relevance of such traditional print texts. For English teachers, a primary challenge is motivating students to read challenging texts. Instead of fighting the inevitable "other" texts, teachers can use them to help students think about reappropriations critically (Cole 46). Why shouldn't teachers consider the teaching of popular culture and digital texts in concert with traditional print texts, such as the canon?

Like so many other literature teachers, including Carol Jago, I believe students need to unplug their digital devices sometimes and exercise patience and focus with, and even enjoy, books (337), but not at the expense of other texts. Teaching popular culture in the English language arts classroom will help today's students read a variety of challenging texts and learn to assess the messages they are receiving in their everyday lives. Popular culture texts include any medium that conveys a message requiring the negotiation, or reading, of meaning: mes-

sages conveyed through, but not limited to, music, film, television, advertisements, the Internet, social networking tools such as digital handheld devices, fan fiction, comics, and graphic novels.

## Why Popular Culture?

Having taught heterogeneously grouped classes for seven years and Advanced Placement Language and Composition for two of those seven, I am well aware of how difficult it is for everyone to be on the same page, literally. Every student came to my literature classes with different cultural backgrounds, reading and writing strengths and weaknesses, interests, even languages, and thus different prior knowledge. All of these factors affect students' ability to read and make meaning of texts. I write this as someone who wholeheartedly believes in a democratic classroom where every student has the potential to read and interact meaningfully with challenging texts. I have found that I could help students make connections and construct meaning by bringing popular culture texts in the classroom and using digital media in conjunction with our canon. Not only was I acknowledging students' interests and helping them see relevance in the literature taught in school, I was also

helping them engage with what they perceived as harder texts.

In my Advanced Placement Language and Composition classes, I often combined everyday popular culture and current issues with our traditional print texts. My students read television commercials, political slogans, even the junior class ring presentation, all while learning to analyze rhetorical strategies. Flexing their emerging analysis muscles, they then read Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and the Declaration of Independence. My classes informally performed *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* and then organized a symposium speaking out to county and school-level administrators about related issues our school was facing. As a class, we delved slowly into the essays of Emerson and Thoreau alongside more contemporary essays from Rachel Carson and Terry Tempest Williams, while also interpreting film clips from *Star Wars* and *American Beauty*.

These connections across texts make lasting impressions on students. Years later I am receiving Facebook and email messages from former students who have graduated long ago, but who are making connections across texts on their own. One student recognized an allusion to *Pygmalion* in a *Family Guy* episode; another wrote that the rhetoric of President Obama's recent speech was slapping her in the face, joking that AP English would stay with her forever. Others are posting videos and quotations from plays and novels in connection to current events and popular culture, demonstrating a seamless blend of so-called in-school and out-of-school literacies.



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Yet many fear allowing students more time with popular culture in the classroom. The assumption that popular culture and digital media are deteriorating students' literacy skills limits teachers and students without any real evidence that these popular texts hurt student literacy. In fact, some studies suggest that teens are already reading and writing more than ever. The researchers for the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 93% of teens write for personal reasons, using both traditional pen and paper and digital tools (Lenhart, Arafen, Smith, and Macgill 10). Surprisingly, their findings support that students *do* believe that more formal and longer writing

assignments would be beneficial in the classroom; while they also feel that the use of digital tools would make writing instruction more relevant, they recognize that technology does not necessarily improve the ideas themselves (47). This research suggests that students are more than capable of moving back and forth between traditional and digital technologies, recognizing the value and limits of both.

Providing popular culture texts in the classroom allows students the opportunity to analyze rhetorical strategies, make thematic connections, examine allusions, develop background knowledge, and question race, class, and gender issues. For example, Pepi Leistyna

and Loretta Alper argue that television shows have an undeniable influence on how we shape our perceptions; because we see these shows as simply entertainment, we ignore how they influence our thinking (501). Having the ability to engage critically with popular culture texts creates the space to examine political and social contexts from which they are created (Morrell 73). Here popular culture provides the tools students need both to read and navigate their current world.

Imagine the literary experience in which students could engage if they were asked to examine the story origins of their favorite video games or movies, or if they were asked to rewrite a classic from a different cultural perspective. Here is a chance for students to examine larger metanarratives and make intertextual connections. This mixing of texts, both literary classics and popular culture, encourages more reading, writing, and critical thinking than would limiting students to a rigidly defined canon.

Furthermore, students need guidance in critically reading popular culture texts. Research suggests that adolescents struggle with negotiating whether information is reliable on the Internet (Rich 3), sometimes not even questioning the source's validity; this, I imagine, has been confirmed many times over in many of our classrooms. Another valid concern is that adolescents are able to insulate themselves by choosing to ignore anything that is too uncomfortable or difficult (Chandler-Olcott and Lewis 170). Using digital media to assess critically news reports and images,

for example, can push students beyond their comfort zones, so they can expand their worldviews and examine authorial intent and rhetorical strategies.

### **How Will Digital Media Challenge Students' Thinking and Reading?**

Reading digital media requires learning to read and negotiate the meanings of the visual, aural, spatial, and graphic, then synthesizing all this information while assessing its validity. Furthermore, popular culture texts, including digital media, "convey meaningful messages that are as varied and complex as the readers, viewers, and listeners who come in contact with them" (Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby 18). How we read these texts depends on our social context and the rhetoric and contexts of the writers themselves. Students may not yet have the knowledge base or critiquing skills to weigh this complex information and make sense of it, because they are rarely given this opportunity. For example, anyone trying to make sense of the current political rhetoric has to rely largely on digital media—mainly through the modes of popular culture, including politicians' Facebook and Twitter accounts. It's a complex process to determine what sources are valid and what rhetorical strategies authors are using to persuade constituents. Where will students learn to negotiate this discourse if not in school?

According to the *New York Times*, "researchers believe that online reading builds on traditional reading skills and also requires new ones, like the abil-

ity to navigate the Web and to synthesize information in many different forms" (Rich, graphic insert). The ability for students to respond to texts through digital media is another layer that adds the challenge of critical thinking and provides a multitude of opportunities for performance-based assessments. The Pew Internet and American Life Project research report on teens, writing, and technology found that students admit to writing better for authentic audiences that include their peers and identify relevance as a key theme in motivation (Lenhart, Arafen, Smith, and Macgill 51–52). Digital media opens the landscape for creativity and audience in reader response, while also providing a space where "readers can both critique and redesign texts in contextually significant ways" (Hagood 542).

### **What Does This Mean for Teachers?**

Teachers can no longer dismiss popular culture texts and digital media as unworthy of the English language arts curriculum. So, now educators need to consider "what pedagogical models will be needed to respond to the new realities?" (Kirkland 9). Already, adolescents are engaged in a surprising number of literacy practices outside of school; these out-of-school literacy practices could be a powerful starting point to engage students with literacy practices in school. Blurring the lines between students' in-school and out-of-school literacies, making our classrooms "dialogic sites" (Kirkland 10), is a chance for students to realize the relevance of

education in their lives. Researchers, educators, and students need to work together to find methods and resources that strengthen students' literacy engagement with a variety of texts.

The goals in a curriculum that include popular culture should allow students to build on their own understandings and collaborate in meaningful ways that include authentic audiences and consequences, while encouraging critical and creative thinking through a high degree of complexity (Dockter, Haug, and Lewis 419). Of course, teachers need to provide students interesting and imaginative reading choices that challenge their thinking; and as Jago argues, literature instruction must focus on helping students make sense of texts as opposed to demonstrating how much the teacher knows (340). One way to do this is to provide multiple entryways for students to make connections (Cole 35), such as using popular culture and digital media with traditionally taught print texts as a method of dialogic reading. Mark A. Faust argues that dialogic reading is a chance for readers to focus on "the essential connection between reading books and reading life-situations" (47). Readers not only ask questions of the text ("Who's talking? Why should I care about this situation? What values and/or beliefs am I being asked to confirm?" [Faust 45]), but they are additionally listening to others' questions and interpretations as well.

For example, teachers can introduce a traditional text such as George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* through popular culture by discussing the many adapted

versions and references in film, theater, television, and music. A quick search for *My Fair Lady* (a popular adaptation of *Pygmalion*) on the Internet Movie Database's website (<http://www.imdb.com>) reveals countless film adaptations and references on television, from *Happy Days* to *Family Guy*. Making connections to popular culture can provide background knowledge for students as they read *Pygmalion*. They can also read about the ancient myths that inspired Shaw's work, considering several reinterpretations of the same story. While they can't read every version, they can begin to see how all texts, popular culture included, are connected. This kind of work encourages multimodal reading and requires students to make connections across texts and cultures.

**While the most obvious advantage of using digital tools and popular culture in the classroom is the potential for increasing students' interest, the equally important benefit is that digital media offer a whole range of challenging texts that will push students further in critical reading and thinking.**

Indeed, many teachers attempt to incorporate technology in their classrooms by having students use the Internet for research or blogging, Microsoft Word for typing, and perhaps PowerPoint for presentations, but teachers can use digital media in more expansive ways to bridge students' out-of-school literacies (and thus, their interests and talents) with those literacies we hope to encourage in


school. While the most obvious advantage of using digital tools and popular culture in the classroom is the potential for increasing students' interest, the equally important benefit is that digital media offer a whole range of challenging texts that will push students further in critical reading and thinking.

## Teaching Today's Student

Whether or not teachers or school systems sanction the reading or teaching of popular culture texts in the classroom, students *are* reading—are even bombarded with—messages from popular culture; therefore, becoming critical consumers of information is an essential literacy skill. No less important, though, is the need to learn how to read longer print texts without hyperlinks and graphics. Teachers have the responsibility to encourage students' ability to distinguish between the kinds of reading skills required for popular media and classic print texts.

Our literacy needs have changed, so to meet the needs of today's students, teachers must make room for these new texts. This is an exciting time when we have within our reach an unlimited array of texts, from popular culture and digital media, to broaden the horizon for reading and connecting with others. The challenge is to broaden how we define what it means to be literate in the 21st century to include the navigation of digital media and the negotiation of meaning from a variety of sources and texts. It also means redefining what we consider texts and learning how to use these newly defined texts with



the traditional print literature that lead us to the English classroom in the first place. 

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### At the Station

The sky children tumble in  
on the dawn wind  
and pummel the boats and houses  
with their hard little fists and heels,  
their cheeks ruddy  
with the joy of destruction.  
See how they laugh and turn  
these words upside down,  
flailing, helpless,  
while the new moon holds up  
the old moon in its arms,  
exhibiting the beauty  
of arrivals and departures?

—Patricia Corbus

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